Mapping Public Service Motivation among Street-Level Bureaucrats: A Bibliometric Study

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Abstract

The efficacy of public policies is highly dependent on the cooperation of street-level bureaucrats, but their abilities to perform are often limited by systemic issues, such as excessive bureaucracy - red tape, insufficient resources and political pressures. In this context, Public Service Motivation becomes an essential mechanism for resilience. The present study proposes a comprehensive mapping of the literature on public service motivation especially focusing on public servants. Through a bibliometric analysis, over 300 WoS articles are analyzed and used to identify global and regional trends. A specific subtopic of interest is the body of research focusing on public service motivation within Eastern Europe. The study aims to contribute to a better understanding of how motivation is conceptualized and studied in different administrative contexts and to highlight potential gaps in the existing research. The findings provide a basis for future empirical investigations and policy-relevant discussions on supporting public employees.

Keywords: *Public Service Motivation; Street-level bureaucrats; Public servants; Eastern Europe*

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1. Introduction

The efficiency and effectiveness of any public administration fundamentally rely on the people who operate within it. While private sector management often revolves around financial incentives, the public sector requires a deeper understanding of intrinsic, prosocial motivators - conceptualized as Public Service Motivation (PSM). Since its conceptualization by Perry and Wise (1990), PSM has been understood as a form of prosocial and intrinsic motivation that explains why individuals are attracted to public-serving roles beyond material incentives. More recently, it has been defined as "an individual's orientation to delivering services to people with a purpose to do good for others and society" (Ritz et al., 2016).

Moreover, the paper presents an Eastern European perspective. Romania, for example, presents a paradox of scale and performance. In 2025, approximately 1.3 million Romanians (roughly 7% of the population) were employed in the public sector (Economedia, 2025). Yet, Romania consistently ranks at or near the bottom of the European Union regarding the overall quality and effectiveness of its public administration (Sobjak, 2021; Prorok, n.d.).

This capability gap highlights a profound efficiency crisis that human motivation could help resolve; empirical data shows that the quality of Romania's public sector output is moderately correlated with worker motivation at a score of 0.47 (Schuster et al., 2023). However, a systemic disconnect remains: during recruitment processes, almost half of these employees were never questioned about their motivation to join the public sector (Sobjak, 2021). This blind spot suggests that while motivation is a proven driver of performance, institutional hiring mechanisms largely ignore it.

While the relevance of PSM is evident, its rapid expansion of raises fundamental questions about its universality. Is PSM a genuinely global phenomenon meaningful across diverse political regimes, or is it a construct primarily established in and optimized for heavily researched nations like the United States and China?

To answer that and more, this paper conducts a comprehensive bibliometric analysis of the Public Service Motivation literature. By systematically mapping publication trends, citation networks, geographic distributions, and keyword co-occurrences, this study aims to: (1) assess how thoroughly and deeply the PSM concept has been established, (2) identify whether PSM research is truly global or heavily concentrated within specific contexts, and (3) uncover trends and priorities that researchers are focusing on.

Ultimately, this macro-level mapping provides a clear picture of the global state of PSM research, offering vital insights into how transitional regions like Eastern Europe can better leverage this concept to fix systemic recruitment and efficiency gaps.

2. Methodology

To systematically evaluate the structural boundaries, global representation, and thematic evolution of Public Service Motivation (PSM) research, this study employs a bibliometric analysis. Bibliometrics allows for the objective mapping of a specific scientific domain, uncovering macro-level publication trends, citation networks, and geographic distributions while offering a predictive glance at emerging research fronts.

The bibliographic data was retrieved from the Web of Science (WoS) database, and the search strategy was executed using Topic (TS) field tags, which scan titles, abstracts, author keywords, and Keywords Plus. To address the research objectives, the data collection workflow was split into two separate phases: a general global dataset and a targeted Eastern European regional sub-dataset. The search looks as follows:

TS=("public service motivation" OR "PSM")

AND

TS=("public servant" OR "street-level" OR "street level" OR "SLB" OR "civil servant*")*

AND (Eastern European phase only)

TS=("Eastern Europe" OR "Southeast Europe" OR "Balkans" OR "post-soviet" OR "Ukraine" OR "Moldova" OR "Romania" OR "Bulgaria" OR "Albania" OR "Serbia" OR "communis*")*

The results include 310 articles for the general scope – with articles spanning from 2003 to 2026, while the Eastern European slice comprises of only 8 articles from 2011 to 2023.

The datasets were then imported into RStudio using the open-source bibliometrix R package (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017). This programming environment was utilized to parse the raw metadata into structured data frames, automatically filtering out exact duplicates and consolidating varying author name formats.

Using both the computational engine of bibliometrix and its graphical user interface (*biblioshiny*), data analysis was executed across multiple dimensions. This included running descriptive metrics (annual scientific production, most productive countries) and structural network visualizations (keyword co-occurrences and citation networks).

3. Results

The results of this bibliometric analysis show the gap between the global development of Public Service Motivation (PSM) research and its limited application in Eastern Europe. Looking closely at the data from Web of Science, we can see two different stories about the growth of the field.

From the start, a first comparison between the two samples shows the striking differences: the global dataset (N=310) has a steady estimated growth rate of 16% per year. These papers have a 28% international co-authorship rate and average a bit under 3 authors per paper. Whereas the regional slice (N=8) is so small, an annual growth rate could not even be computed. The international co-authorship rate is significantly higher in the Eastern European slice (reaching 62%), while the actual number of co-authors per paper stays stable at 3. This shows that while regional research is "incipient", there is high collaboration. EE scholars are frequently working together and publishing alongside other researchers rather than working in isolation.

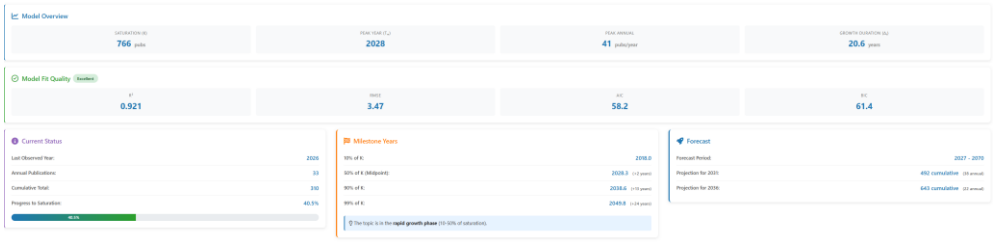


Figure 1. Lifecycle of scientific production (global dataset)

The predictive model run on the global dataset (Figure 1) is highly reliable, with model fit indices showing it explains over 92% of the variation in publication trends (R2 = 0.921). According to this forecast, the global peak year for PSM research will be 2028, which is when it will hit approximately 50% of its total lifecycle knowledge saturation. The data shows we are currently in a rapid growth phase, and the model predicts the field will reach 99% of its total publication saturation over the next 25 years.

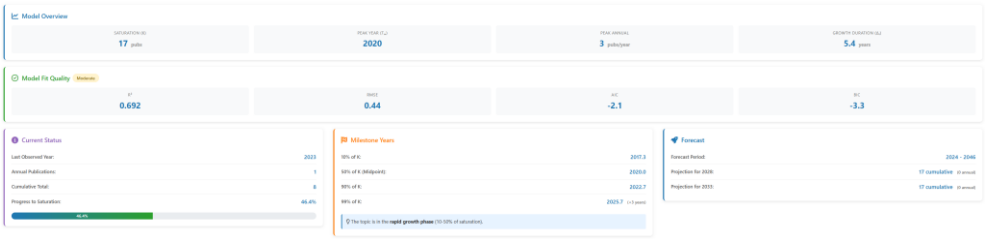


Figure 2. Lifecycle of scientific production (regional dataset)

When we look at the model for the regional slice (Figure 2), it tells a completely different story. It claims that Eastern Europe focus already hit its peak back in 2020, with 99% of its cumulative publications wrapped up by 2025.

However, this regional model has low credibility, with the sample size being so small (N = 8). A few early papers may skew the math, making it look like the topic is declining when it actually might just be struggling to take off.



Figure 3. Wordcloud (global vs regional dataset)

The global word cloud (Figure 3, left) shows that practical workplace outcomes are central to the PSM discourse, highlighting terms like *job satisfaction, performance, transformational leadership, organizational commitment, corruption, and burnout*. At the same time, highly theoretical keywords appear frequently: (1) human-centric: *intrinsic motivation, self-determination theory, person-organization fit, antecedents, attitudes, and perceptions* are highly visible, showing the interest of researchers in the psychology of public servants; (2) technical concepts: terms like *meta-analysis, mediation, and dimensions* stand out. This proves there is a genuine, technical interest in settling what the exact sub-dimensions of PSM are and measuring the specific conditions under which they perform.

For the regional focus, the core keywords stay relatively comparable to the global dataset. However, there is a distinct regional addition: *communist party of* pops up in

the data. This indicates that when researchers look at Eastern Europe, they actively take the region's unique historical, political, and social background into account.

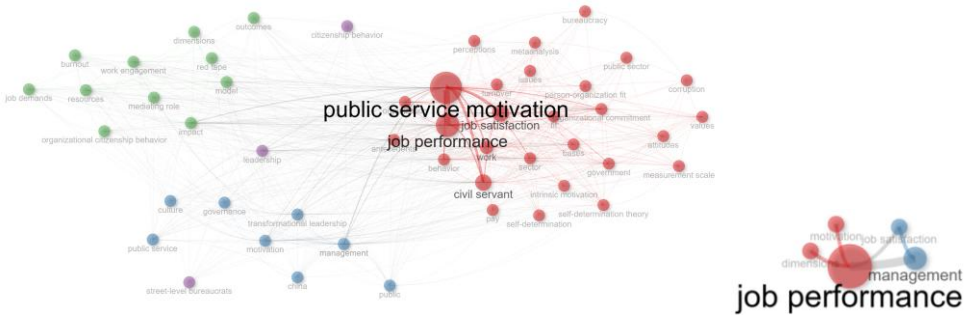


Figure 4. Co-occurrence network (global vs regional dataset)

The global co-occurrence network (Figure 4) is highly dense, which confirms that the field is scientifically mature. It breaks down into four clear thematic clusters:

- **The Red Cluster**: The core of the network, linking public service motivation tightly with job performance and job satisfaction. This triangulation shows that the global field has successfully shifted from a purely abstract concept to a validated predictor of real organizational output.
- **The Green Cluster**: Heavily focused on job demands, resources, and burnout. It suggests that globally, researchers look into the link between PSM and organizational stability
- **The Blue Cluster:** This connects transformational leadership and governance, positioning PSM as a trait that can may be built upon through good leadership styles and institutional setups
- **The Purple Cluster:** This features fewer links but connects directly to ethics and administrative values.

Looking at the Eastern European co-occurrence network, we see a clear structural simplification. It contains far fewer nodes and pathways, suggesting that regional research is still in a foundational stage. It is still trying to establish basic empirical correlations rather than exploring nuanced leadership styles or complex psychological layers.

Despite this simple structure, the high international collaboration rate acts as a critical bridge. EE scholars are essentially "importing" the structural maturity of the global red cluster to help validate and reform local management practices.

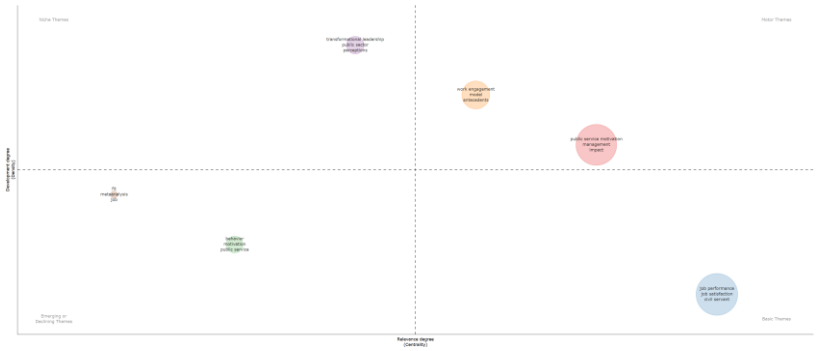


Figure 5. Thematic map (global dataset)

The global Thematic Map maps out exactly how the concepts are evolving across different quadrants:

- **Motor Themes** (Top-Right): These are well-developed, driving themes focused on the direct *impact* of managing PSM and taking a methodical approach to modeling employee attitudes, with a heavy emphasis on *work engagement*.
- **Basic Themes** (Bottom-Right): The primary foundational anchor identified here is the highly relevant cluster of *job performance* and *job satisfaction*.
- **Niche Themes** (Top-Left): *Transformational leadership* currently sits here, meaning it is treated as a specialized, isolated approach rather than a mainstream standard.
- **Emerging/Declining Themes** (Bottom-Left): *Meta-analysis* is explicitly emerging, which proves the global body of research is maturing so fast that it now requires systematic reviews to centralize all the findings.

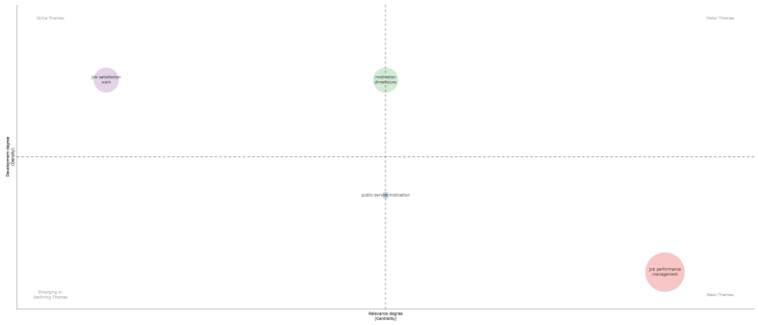


Figure 6. Thematic map (regional dataset)

The regional map (Figure 6) looks completely rearranged:

- **Basic Themes:** *Job Performance* and *Management* are placed here, confirming that the region is still busy establishing the very groundwork of the discipline.
- **Niche Themes:** *Job Satisfaction* appears as a niche theme rather than a foundational basic theme.

This finding suggests that Eastern European scholars are currently prioritizing hard organizational output and performance metrics over the individual psychological states of their workers in their current publication cycles.

Ultimately, if the global map represents the regional destination - a nuanced, engagement-driven ecosystem - the Eastern European map shows our current coordinates. The region is in a critical transition period, still fighting to prove the fundamental, bottom-line value of public service motivation within a transforming administration.

4. Discussion

The bibliometric gaps reveal a significant divide in how public administration is researched and managed globally versus regionally. First, the maturity discrepancy shows that while the global field treats PSM as a mature, validated tool, Eastern Europe (EE) is still in a foundational stage. Globally, research has moved past basic definitions to focus on advanced organizational design and effects. On the other hand, EE is still busy establishing the absolute baseline empirical proof that motivation directly connects to performance. Secondly, the collaboration bridge indicates that EE public administration research relies heavily on external networks, showing a 62% international co-authorship rate compared to 28% globally. This collaboration helps validate and reform transitional public sectors that are still navigating path-dependent post-communist legacies. Thirdly, the thematic inversion exposes how the region views its workforce. Globally, administrative research actively balances work output with human-centric factors like job satisfaction and engagement. On the EE map, *job satisfaction* is isolated as a specialized niche, while *management* and *performance* are the primary basic anchors. This structural layout helps explain practical hiring blind spots. To improve administrative effectiveness, regional policy and research must shift from just forcing performance metrics to cultivating leadership and employee engagement.

5. Limitations

This study is subject to several limitations. First, the analysis relies exclusively on the Web of Science (WoS) database, which may underrepresent relevant studies indexed in other databases such as Scopus or Google Scholar, particularly regional and non-English publications. As a result, the Eastern European research landscape may appear smaller than it is in practice. Second, the regional dataset remains limited in size (N=8), restricting the reliability of predictive lifecycle modeling and thematic generalizations. Consequently, the findings related to Eastern Europe should be interpreted as exploratory rather than definitive. Finally, bibliometric methods primarily capture publication patterns and citation structures, but cannot fully assess the substantive quality, theoretical depth, or empirical rigor of the analyzed studies.

6. Conclusions

This bibliometric study mapped the global development of Public Service Motivation (PSM) research while specifically examining its representation within Eastern European administrative contexts. The findings reveal a significant imbalance between the maturity of the global literature and the comparatively limited regional body of research. While global PSM scholarship has evolved into a dense and methodologically diverse field focused on organizational outcomes, leadership, engagement, and employee wellbeing, Eastern European research remains concentrated on establishing foundational links between motivation, management, and performance.

Overall, the study suggests that PSM research is not fully uniform across administrative and historical contexts. Instead, the concept appears to evolve differently depending on institutional maturity, governance traditions, and broader socio-political conditions. For Eastern Europe, this creates both a challenge and an opportunity: while the field remains underdeveloped, there is substantial potential for future research examining how motivation interacts with administrative reform, recruitment practices, leadership styles, and employee retention within transitional governance systems.

At the same time, the findings should be interpreted with caution due to the limited size of the regional dataset and the exclusive reliance on the Web of Science database. Future studies could expand the analysis by incorporating additional databases, comparative regional case studies, and empirical investigations capable of testing

whether the distinct thematic patterns identified in this paper persist across broader samples of Eastern European public administrations.

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